

# GOING TO EXTREMES

Photo by Justin Engels

## *Summer Sports Camp Pays Off For a Lifetime in Health, Happiness, and Take-Home Skills...*

BY SALLIE BERNARD, BOARD PRESIDENT, EXTREME SPORTS CAMP

**I**n the summer of 2001, my husband and our three tween sons drove to the vast woods of Maine. Two of the boys were headed for an awesome multi-week sleep-away camp experience. Our third son, Bill, has autism and was not allowed in this program—typical kids only. He came back home with his dad for his usual therapies. The jazzed-up summer my typical kids experienced got me scheming about creating a sleep-away outdoorsy camp that welcomed and challenged kids on the spectrum. So in 2004, I took the plunge and Extreme Sports Camp began operations in the Colorado Rockies.

Sleep-away summer camp is among the most memorable and formative experiences of childhood, according to testimonials from the millions of grown-ups who are camp alumni. Meeting new friends, trying something adventurous, and getting away from home and school are the magic ingredients that transform children into competent adults. Sleep-away camps are designed to provide life's real lessons in a safe, structured and supervised environment, with profound yields in self-confidence, self-esteem, and social skills.

### LETTING GO

Yet many parents of children on the autism spectrum have difficulty envisioning their son or daughter being part of such an experience. Fears about safety, letting go, capacity to participate, motivation to participate, competency of unfamiliar staff, and traveling to a strange place can hold parents back. Not to mention competing priorities like therapies, extended school year, maintaining stable routines, trying new diets, and getting health insurance reimbursements. But if millions of typical kids head off to camp every summer, why not your child with autism?

If your child's world is just a classroom and endless therapies, he or she will miss out on the range of experiences that foster a well-adjusted adult with a developed self-identity. Sometimes we get so focused on academics, behaviors or speech that we forget our children are people who have an inner life and need diverse experiences just like anyone else. If anything, children with autism need even more opportunities than typical children to access enough essential bridges to adulthood since they encounter so little of them in the highly structured, artificial environments to which they are routinely channeled.

Sleep-away camp is one way to provide these diverse experiences. In fact, sleep-away camp provides that perfect balance between the uber-structure of school and therapies and the complete down time of a lazy, un-programmed summer. It gets kids away from their all-consuming routines and into an unfamiliar but supportive environment—just the right setting to enable growth and learning.

Exciting programs exist across the country that welcome those on the spectrum. Extreme Sports Camp offers outdoor adventures like kayaking, waterskiing, wakeboarding, rock climbing, mountain biking, hiking and swimming. Its staff is experienced and trained specifically on autism learning styles. Kids age seven and above as well as adults gain competency in these sports, regardless of athletic prowess or autism severity. Participants live in a community college residence hall and include typical peers and siblings.

Our program features adventure sports because they are a fabulous way to gain body confidence, get in shape, appreciate nature, and just be healthy. There is a direct connection between physical competency and social, mental and cognitive health. [See *Total Health* graphic on p25.] Each impacts the other. Overall, outdoor exercise can outperform medications in improving health across many domains.

### LET'S GET PHYSICAL

According to a 2012 poll, parents rate not getting enough exercise and obesity as the top two health concerns for children. These conditions are even bigger problems for children on the spectrum, who are prone to being overweight and sedentary. Athletics reduce obesity, modulate poor appetites, and get you away from indoor sedentary activities like video gaming, television or desk work. Physical activity buffers against cognitive decline and heart disease, regulates the immune system and reduces infections. Weight bearing

**REACHING NEW HEIGHTS**—Campers at ESC experience a wide range of physical activities conferring a sense of accomplishment and boosting self-esteem. ▶

exercise increases bone density which can be lower in autism, and fitness can improve posture. Complex motor movements in natural environments can enhance sensory integration.

Younger children have less difficulty getting exercise. They are in constant motion, schools incorporate play time, play equipment abounds, and OTs are core members of therapy teams. Deficits in physical activity start in the tween years: educators devalue recess, OTs disappear and sports become the age appropriate way to gain fitness. Yet sports become less accessible, with more rules and selectivity. Tolerance for learning differences or behaviors goes down, and the horseback riding or local swim class is no longer welcoming. ASD kids may get edited out of fitness opportunities altogether.

Compounding external pressures, children with autism may appear unmotivated toward physical activity. Some may seem more interested in electronics or trains,



Photo courtesy of Extreme Sports Camp

be perceived as too awkward at sports or have too much fatigue. These perceptions are sometimes held by the person with autism him- or herself. He or she may have felt out of place joining team or playground sports at school, or may have been sidelined by instructors and peers.

Such perceptions can be self-defeating. Virtually anyone on the spectrum is capable of meeting

or exceeding exercise guidelines of 60 minutes of activity per day, enjoying the activity, become sports-proficient, and making fitness part of their daily routine for life. Interest can be developed over time, just like any other area of learning. What's important is that once adulthood is reached, your child has a repertoire of athletic activities that he or she enjoys and is competent in.

Autism-friendly adventure camps are a way for a child to experience and build capacity in a variety of sports from which they can choose the ones that are right for them.

## BOOSTING SOCIAL SKILLS: GAINS FROM CAMP GO FAR BEYOND THE PHYSICAL...

Humans are social beings, meaning they have a need for relationships with other humans. One's sense of self is created in part by membership in various groups.

When meaningful affiliations are made, we can learn from each other and this reciprocal learning can modify our perception of who we are. Unfortunately, solitude and isolation are common in autism. Critical avenues for self-actualization are narrowed.

Camps are a place to build and maintain rewarding relationships. At camp, everyone is new and the playing field is level. Everyone has a chance to be good at something and not good at something, to mentor someone else and be mentored, to be a potential friend. There's the cool factor too—of gaining some bragging rights when you show pictures of yourself scaling cliffs or navigating rapids. Classmates and siblings back home may be impressed too, and may see your child in a new light, opening up social opportunities outside of camp itself.

Group activities at camp allow for a sense of belonging and connection with others. Physical activity that takes place in a play/social situation helps improve social skills. Extreme Sports Camp conducts its activities in groups of small teams to foster that social interaction. A sport provides an entree into a group

based on a shared experience, and promotes camaraderie and social interaction with other participants and spectators.



Photo courtesy of Extreme Sports Camp

Sports are immensely social, even individualized ones like rock climbing or mountain biking. Each sport has a culture which includes group bonding over shared experiences, interests, equipment, vocabulary, and mutual appreciation of achievement. Everyone can exchange a war story (in words or pictures) about getting to the top of a climb or down a bike trail. These group experiences are platforms to foster growth in self-identity, self-awareness, and even empathy. Congratulations on successes or commiseration on defeats with your fellow adventurers is a component of perspective taking.

Adventure sports generally take place in settings shared by anyone else enjoying that sport, rather than segregated areas. These are rivers, lakes, trails, and climbing spots that are open to anyone. Participants are there as sportsmen, not because of any other condition they might have, and they are accepting of anyone who is trying their

sport. Adventure sports are the ultimate in community-based settings.

## GOT AUTISM? GET MOVING!

Camps may look like pure fun, but the work is quite serious and the outcomes important—to foster strong individuals who are more competent, confident and healthy. What is learned at camp is often transferred home. Families can bond over sports with a now eager and able child. Campers may be willing to try new things like different foods. They may feel empowered to venture into new social relationships. They may be able to self-regulate better and feel okay about getting out of the house.

As for my son Bill, he's gone to camp every year since 2004, both summer and winter programs. Last summer he spent seven weeks there. It was a life changer for him to be away from home for that long. He learned to value his own space and rely on his peers for support rather than his family, which is what young adults do. He gained competency in taking care of himself and his room at the college dorm. He's a solid athlete and goes biking, hiking and skiing with my husband as well as friends. In the past it was hard to get him out of the house. Now he's figured out the rewards of being out in the community all day long. Every day his capabilities and talents are more evident. I couldn't be a prouder mom.



Photo courtesy of Extreme Sports Camp

Exercise then becomes an appealing daily routine for life and part of the person's identity.

My son Bill, an annual camp participant, is a perfect example. He has been able to try water sports, climbing, biking and much more. He has had periods of resistance to each one, but has circled back to most. Now as a young adult, he has about eight athletic activities that he enjoys on a regular basis. He gets exercise at least an hour a day and is in excellent physical health.

We see such accomplishments over and over at Extreme Sports Camp. Participants who arrive out of shape or complete athletic novices end up doing well, progressing through the sports, and having fun. Many go home and become lifelong athletes.

### BUILDING THE BRAIN

Research has consistently shown that physical exercise can enhance brain functioning and learning ability. A study out in May 2012 showed that long-term academic performance among children who engaged in daily physical activity was much higher than their sedentary peers. (Malmo University, 2012) Maybe that's because physical activity promotes growth of new brain cells. There is evidence that activity-based learning, in which the learning is achieved through

hands-on activity rather than being received passively, is an effective learning modality for both typical and spectrum kids .

Not only can exercise improve cognition, but the requirements of a sport can foster flexible decision-making, which are weak areas for those with autism. Outdoor sports

provide a platform to practice innovation and generalizability, because no two situations are identical and the person has to apply prior learning to a new situation. Improvisation is required, even if subtle. An example is bouldering, where climbing down a series of large rocks requires a set of motor skills and strategies that must be adapted to each rock encountered. Unlike a simulated indoor wall, no two rocks in nature are the same.

Adventure sports can strengthen executive functioning skills as they require planning, sequencing, focus and attention, thoughtful action, self-initiation and problem-solving. You can't rappel down a cliff if you don't look to see where to put your foot next. Movement in the outdoors requires outward attention, reducing the constant inner thoughts that our kids seem to have. Regular exercise can improve your memory too. Some types of memory are weaker in those with autism.

Camp life, which features changed routines and places, promotes cognitive flexibility and adaptability. The diversity of activities broadens interests to ameliorate the tendency in autism toward intensity of focus on one activity.

### ENHANCING EMOTIONAL WELLNESS

Mental health encompasses inner thoughts, emotional states and outward behavior. A person with sound mental health can identify, analyze, cope with and act positively on their feelings and thoughts. He/she can then maintain a sense of well-being and more competently navigate the world. This leads to positive self-perception, positive perception of self by others, positive character traits and motivation to achieve life goals.

Research shows that physical exercise improves emotional states and behaviors. Endorphins kick in after a good workout and positive feelings flow. Aerobic exercise can decrease anxiety and depressive symptoms which are problems for many on the spectrum. Aerobic exercise can reduce the occurrence and severity of stereotypic and aggressive behaviors, which are common distressing features of autism.

Outdoor sports are intrinsically motivating, providing natural, immediate consequences, both positive and negative: you sink into the water if you drop the ski rope, but if you hold onto the rope, you can have a blast skiing over the wake. Repeating these processes many times a day scaffolds to accountability to yourself, rather than to an artificial motivator like a toy or food. Self-reliance and a willingness to do it yourself, for yourself, follow.

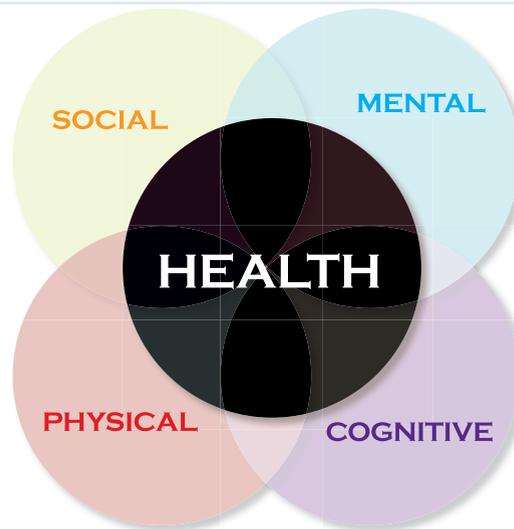
Progress in a sport requires persistence, which is a critical skill for success in the adult world. Accomplishing a tangible challenge like riding a wakeboard fosters an internal sense of competency as a person. Trying new activities is a mechanism for self-awareness about what you are good at or not good at and what you like or don't like, which is integral to becoming a full person.

Mastery provides a sense of pride and success and is a catalyst for motivation and an attitude of self-growth. Mastery and self-growth are interconnected and mutually enhancing.

These experiences provide practice in self-appreciation. Self-appreciation is the ability to not just notice what is wrong with us, but to also become aware of what we do well and to appreciate our strengths. Through the group dynamics of these sports activities, appreciation of and empathy for others as well as self can be developed by consciously observing and comparing our strengths and weaknesses to others.

Not to mention that adventure sports take place in the great outdoors. Getting outside into green spaces has been shown to have a calming effect, reducing stress, regulating emotions and improving resilience. A recent study described in the *Wall Street Journal* found that "after viewing scenes that involved green trees, participants reported feeling happier and their exercise less difficult than when the same scenes appeared in black-and-white or red, suggesting that exercising in nature or simulated green spaces could be helpful for exercisers."

A recent blog on *The Thinking Moms Revolution* lamented the fact that our kids are growing up without knowing



◀ **TOTAL HEALTH**—depends on social, mental, cognitive and physical health.

the most basic tasks, like how to mail a package, putting strains not only on independence but also self-confidence and self-esteem. While home and school teach a lot, camp is a place to learn many practicalities of life: buckling a helmet, riding a bike, cafeteria navigation, dorm room door decoration and "Bunk Bed 101". The payoff is a sense of responsibility and competence in navigating the world.

It might seem counterintuitive that a camp away from the comforting routines of home can reduce the anxiety that often co-exists with autism. Yet by exploring different ways of doing and being, our kids become less isolated and less anxious due to lack of understanding of the world. A camp program can give those opportunities to cope with stress in a controlled, safe way and can facilitate adaption to change.

Simply being away from parents and siblings can be empowering toward independence and self-reliance. We routinely see our campers across all ages happily separate from parents. Our kids seem quite interested in exploring on their own. Parents are often surprised by this, but also relieved and proud. ◀

### FIND OUT MORE

- ▶ **Extreme Sports Camp**  
[www.extremesportscamp.org](http://www.extremesportscamp.org)
- ▶ **Exercise Connection**  
<http://www.eautism.com>,
- ▶ **Eric Chessen**  
[www.autismfitness.com](http://www.autismfitness.com)
- ▶ **Horse Boy Foundation**  
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